



# ART HISTORY SUPPLEMENT

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# Reclaiming Architectural History: The Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence

by Christian Frost

In the first century BC Vitruvius wrote that architects should have a wide knowledge in order to practice and in doing so established the first known treatise on architecture. However, by articulating the subject of architecture in this manner he located it within the realms of knowledge rather than as part of a broader context. With the rise of humanism in the quattrocento variations on this type of understanding became the basis for much of the theoreticization of architecture, as well as the ground for its possible reintegration with other issues of history and culture, through ideas of inter-disciplinarity. Following a mapping of current facts and theories regarding the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, this paper suggests that in order to begin to develop a more holistic understanding of late medieval and early Renaissance architecture, knowledge from this disciplinary matrix benefits from being recalibrated within a framework of modern phenomenological hermeneutics, allowing ideas of practical wisdom which rose out of the particular conditions and actions of the time to resonate with contemporary horizons of experience.

## Introduction

Since the publication of Alberti's *De re aedificatoria* in 1452 many treatises on architecture have suggested that the knowledge of the architect should echo the multi-disciplinary requirements set out by Vitruvius in the first century:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Architecture became a profession in a form familiar to us now during the Renaissance. Vitruvius' description is relatively comprehensive but explains the fabric of the city and the actions of the 'architect' in a very technical manner, not really touching on the more symbolic aspects of architecture and the order of the city described by Joseph Rykwert in *The Idea of the Town* (London: Faber, 1988). This limited coverage of the topic was brought into the Renaissance via the rediscovery of his work in the early fifteenth century. The circulation of this work and the subsequent publication

He should be a man of letters, skillful with a pencil, instructed in geometry, know much history, have listened diligently to the philosophers, be acquainted with music, not ignorant of medicine, learned in the responses of the jurists, and be acquainted with the rational order of astronomy and the heavens.<sup>2</sup>

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Given this description of the broad knowledge required to practice as an architect it follows that historians should perhaps evaluate buildings from this period (and all others) within a similarly broad multi-disciplinary framework. However, this has not always been the case, in fact architectural historians have often narrowed their approach to cover very specific areas of study utilising methods such as connoisseurship to date buildings or particular areas of sociology to categorise their value. Countering this trend, cultural historians of the twentieth century attempted to cover a broader horizon of subject matter with varying degrees of success and in the process have received criticism that, confronted with the vastness of the material, this approach is also subject to the same disciplinary limitations as the historical methods it set out to challenge. Panofsky's book *Architecture and Scholasticism* is one such example where he tries to link the rise of Gothic architecture with the theoretical mores of the emerging scholastics, and in the process also interprets architecture as a form of knowledge which sits alongside knowledge from other areas. Insights gained from this and other specific disciplinary investigations are not in themselves the problem. Indeed, as the next section of this paper will show, it can help describe much about the topic or building in question. The problem arises when attempts are made to reconstruct a picture of the world within which the artefact was created from this often disparate mass of information, a problem exacerbated by over reliance on documental sources (when required as a

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of treatises by Alberti (1404-72), Serlio (1475-1554) and Palladio (1508-80), all of which built on Vitruvius' text, had a major influence on the developing classical tradition of architecture in the west.

<sup>2</sup>Et ut litteratus sit, peritus graphidos, eruditus geometria, historias complures noverit, philosophos diligenter audierit, musicam scierit, medicinae non sit ignarius, responsa iurisconsultorum noverit, astrologiam caelique rationes cognitae habeat. *Vitruvius, On Architecture*, Vol 1, trans. Frank Granger (ed.), Loeb Classical Library (London: Harvard University Press, 1931/2002), 9.

proof of an argument) and by concentrating on material culture (where architecture as object is subject to the connoisseurship of the critic and the imposition of values from the contemporary viewer) at the same time as other accessible but mistrusted sources (such as myth, festivals, liturgy, and the broader evidence embodied in the building in relation to its cultural context) have been ignored. These partial approaches have, in the end, restricted understanding of the architecture of the past and limited the way in which architecture and history have been contextualized and drawn upon in the present. This is particularly evident in histories of medieval architecture where, because people of the time believed the buildings themselves were evidence enough of intent, treatises were all but non-existent; thus limiting the frequency and factual clarity of documents describing the architecture in question. It is clear from broader studies in cultural history that instead of a set of values familiar to the contemporary critic where a valued and valuable reciprocity exists between architecture and written ideas, in the medieval period the artificer(s) did not feel the need for explanations as distinct from things and therefore it must be concluded that the relationship between theory to practice was not different in character; it was altogether different. At the time, the results of creative endeavour were not viewed as the result of the application of distinct ideas about theory and knowledge but more akin to the practical wisdom or *phronesis* discussed by Aristotle which is ‘... the exact opposite of intuitive intelligence. Intelligence apprehends the truth of definitions which cannot be proved by argument, while prudence (*phronesis*) involves knowledge of the ultimate particular thing, which cannot be attained by science but only by “perception”’.<sup>3</sup> The practical wisdom which is necessary for the making of architecture is at no point in the process of fabrication or perception abstracted from the world, it is seen as inseparable from it.

But how is it possible to know how this form of wisdom was manifested in the past? What questions can legitimately be asked in relation

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *The Nichomachian Ethics*, Book 6, Chapter 8. Trans. J.A.K. Thomson, (London: Penguin, 1953), 182. This work was re-introduced into the European corpus of the middle-ages by the Arabic scholar Averroës but became more significant through the work of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.



to the topic in question? And is there not a real danger that when evaluating buildings from the past that all reconstructions will be fictions created more from current interests than historical realities? Or are their ways that a more complete understanding of the building in its context—past and present—can be accomplished? Chenu, writing on this difficult subject in relation to the developments in theology during the twelfth-century renaissance suggests that the only way to understand the context, aims and influences of the past is to re-construct it:

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One always runs the risk of a subjective interpretation which imputes unverifiable and possibly imaginary relationships to the reality being described. But this is a risk worth running if it is true that the task of the historian is to construct and not simply to recover. Nor can his task be anything else.<sup>4</sup>

As a religious scholar it is clear that Chenu was referring to a 'construction' of the past that somehow resonated with his own contemporary moral and spiritual horizons rather than an interpretation which perfectly recovered the original intent. This examination was, for him, all the more real because it engaged with this fusion of ideas. However, outside the confines of religious hermeneutics, which originated within the biblical exegesis of Christian tradition, the 'risks' associated with such an undertaking can be problematic—as highlighted by Susan Sontag who suggested that '... interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.'<sup>5</sup> Chenu is more generous. His sentiments rest in a more open desire to understand the latent culture of the lived world framed by what Gadamer calls 'effective historical consciousness' (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) which allows a fusion of past and present horizons rather than the victory of the one over the other. For him interpretation does not relate to the closedness of signs or the subjectivity of the observer but to the openness of symbols understood within a shared tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> M.D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the 12th Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Medieval Academy of America, 1997, originally published 1957), xix.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009). 7.

Within this context, and building on the original Greek term ‘... *historia* with its emphasis on an “enquiry” rather than a record and its inclusion of present as well as past events’,<sup>6</sup> this paper asks whether there is anything new an architect *as* historian, interpreting the ‘situation of a building’, can offer. The vehicle for this discussion, the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, is both an icon and a talisman to the city, its history has been shaped by historiography as much as by the history of Florence and the region; archaeologists, art historians, historians and liturgists have all looked at the building and subsequently made comments on its past. The contextualization of it here—within the critical centuries preceding the early Renaissance; in relation to the rites it housed; as well as the timeline for its construction and the ideas it embodied—suggests that by understanding architecture as the manifestation of practical wisdom, broader evaluations and interpretations can be undertaken and, as a result, the ‘discipline’ of architectural history could be re-evaluated and resituated in such a manner that it gives a clearer and more realistic understanding of the past relevant to the present.

#### Disciplinary Knowledge: The Archaeologist, the Art Historian and the Historian

There has been much written on the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence from fourteenth-century chroniclers such as Villani<sup>7</sup> to contemporary archaeologists and art historians. This section covers some of the most recent additions to this discourse and sets out the current understanding of the building. Most recently, in 1994 Antonio Paolucci edited a two-volume set on the building *The Baptistery of San Giovanni, Florence*<sup>8</sup> featuring essays on many aspects of the building by various art historians and a comprehensive photographic survey. This work built on research on the baptistery, notably by the art historian Franklin Toker, who is also in the process of compiling a set of books on Florence, with, in the first volume ‘On

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<sup>6</sup> John Onians, ‘Art History, *Kunstgeschichte* and *Historia*,’ *Art History*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (June 1978). 132.

<sup>7</sup> Giovanni Villani (c. 1276 or 1280–1348) was a Florentine merchant who chronicled the history of Florence up to and including his own time and was followed in this task by Leonardo Bruni (1370 – 1444) often called the first modern historian.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Paolucci ed., *The Baptistery of San Giovanni, Florence*, (Modena: F.C. Panini, 1994). This book also contains an extensive bibliography covering previous writings on the baptistery.

*Holy Ground: Liturgy, Architecture and Urbanism in the Cathedral and the Streets of Florence*,<sup>9</sup> translations of the liturgies for baptism from the thirteenth century. Although this work begins to broaden the context of the historiography, Toker's work on Florence is primarily based around extensive archaeological work completed over the past four decades.

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Toker's and Paolucci's works are the most recent attempts (also see Pietramellara (archaeologist)<sup>10</sup>, Busignani (art historians)<sup>11</sup>, and Cardini (various)<sup>12</sup>) to understand the significance of this particular building both in its singularity and in its relation to the city.

Throughout the history of Florence the Baptistery of San Giovanni its origins, building programs and iconographic developments have been subject to question; its significance for the identity of the city led Villani, writing in the early part of the fourteenth century, to suggest that the building originated in the Roman period as a Temple to Mars.<sup>13</sup> However, in 1976, Toker argued convincingly that archaeological evidence pointed to the existence of an earlier baptistery on the site of the current building and that this smaller church was only later replaced by the current building. This hypothesis included the idea that the central octagon visible in the existing pavement was not, as had been interpreted, remnants of a large full immersion font, but actually marked the extent of the original building, probably constructed around 500 (although the *terminus ante quem* can only be given as 897) as a site for the mass conversion of Langobard Arians into the Catholic faith.<sup>14</sup> Toker goes on to suggest that this initial building remained until it was replaced by the existing building at the beginning of the twelfth century—complete enough by 1128 to receive a new font.

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<sup>9</sup> Franklin Toker, *On Holy Ground: Liturgy, Architecture and Urbanism in the Cathedral and the Streets of Florence*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Carla Pietramellara, *Battistero di San Giovanni a Firenze*, (Firenze: Rilievo e studio Critico, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> Alberto Busignani and Roberto Bencini, *Le Chiese di Firenze: Il Battistero di San Giovanni*, (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> D. & M. Cardini, *Il bel San Giovanni e Santa Maria del Fiore: il centro religioso di Firenze del tardo antico al Rinascimento*, (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Rose E. Selfe, trans., *Villani's Chronicle; Being Selections from the First Nine Books of the Chronicle Florentine of Giovanni Villani*, (Westminster: A Constable, 1896), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Franklin Toker, "The Baptistery below the Baptistery of Florence", *The Art Bulletin*, Vol 58, No. 2 (Jun 1976), 165.

This broad outline of the history of the building and some of its original decoration was developed further by Werner Jacobson, also an art historian, in 1980. He argued that the placing of the font was an event of secondary importance in the history of the building and archaeological evidence, along with reports surrounding political events—particularly in relation to Bishop Gerard of Florence (1045-61, later Pope Nicholas II, 1058-61) who was one of the most significant church reformers of the time—suggested that the baptistery was erected sometime during the period 1039 to 1059 (including the external marble encrustation, up to and including the second order) (Figure 1 and 2) when it was consecrated by pope Nicholas II, making it ‘the first and most important example of Florentine marble revetment, and an early monument to the agenda of eleventh-century church reform in Italy’.<sup>15</sup>

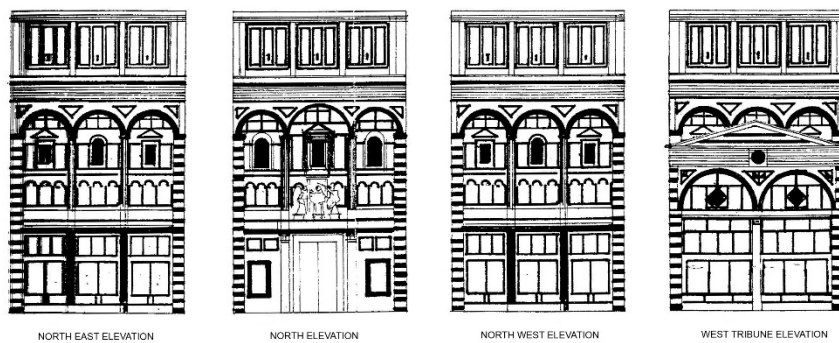


Figure 1 San Giovanni External Elevations 1

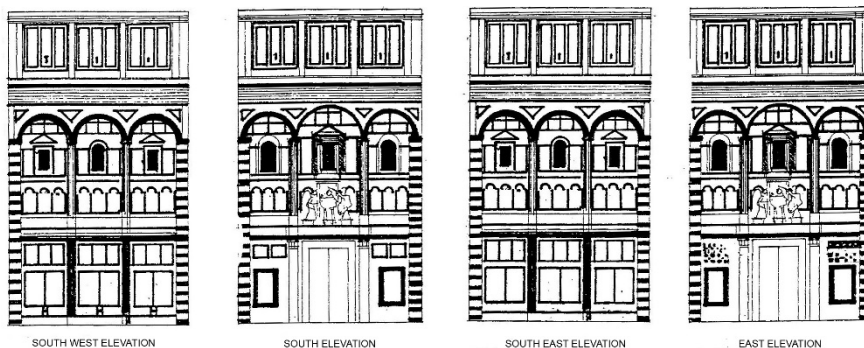


Figure 2 San Giovanni External Elevations 2

<sup>15</sup> Werner Jacobson, “Zur Datierung des Florentiner Baptisteriums S. Giovanni”, *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 43, (1980), 243. Translated by the author.

Morolli, writing in 1994 did not cite Jacobson in his chapter 'The Architecture of the Baptistery and the "good antique style"'. He agreed that the 'second' baptistery building was consecrated by Nicholas II in 1059<sup>16</sup> but suggested that 'if it did not mark the placing of the first stone of the temple, [it] clearly indicated complete renewal in the Romanesque style'<sup>17</sup>. He then described a more 'abstract' second stage of construction from 1100-1150 supported by the 'Vallombrosan order, the city and the consuls'<sup>18</sup> and a final stage, from around 1200 which was more 'profoundly' gothic. What these different stages might mean in the context of baptism and the rule of the city will be discussed later but Villani confirms the second period of Morelli's timeline, stating that in 1150 the lantern, funded by the Calimala Guild,<sup>19</sup> was placed atop the dome which itself had been completed around 1130.

The exterior revetment is now accepted to have been undertaken sometime between its consecration in the eleventh century and the end of the thirteenth century when, in 1293, Arnolfo di Cambio was entrusted with the task of replacing some of the sandstone on the corners with marble.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned earlier, Jacobson placed the ground floor encrustation in the first half of the eleventh century against the conclusions of Paatz (PhD Göttingen, post-doctoral work supervised by Goldschmidt who also taught Panofsky amongst others) and Horn (Hamburg PhD with Panofsky), earlier who had placed it between 1059 and 1128.<sup>21</sup> Horn, through a detailed analysis of the structure compared the internal buttressing of the wall with other buildings in Florence,<sup>22</sup> placed the construction of the ground and first floor from

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<sup>16</sup> Busignani and Bencini, *Il Battistero*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Gabrielle Morolli, "The Architecture of the Baptistery and the 'good antique style'", in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Morolli, "good antique style," 93. The Vallombrosan order used the Benedictine rule and their motherhouse was about 30 miles from Florence. They were supportive of actions against simony and their abbot held a seat on the Florentine Senate.

<sup>19</sup> This date was reported by Villani. The members of the Calimala Guild (Arte di Calimala) were finishers of foreign cloth and the guild was one of the greater guilds of Florence.

<sup>20</sup> Morolli "good antique style," 42. Vasari states that de Cambio encrusted all eight outer sides but in fact was mis-quoting Villani who wrote that he only replaced the corner pilasters.

<sup>21</sup> See Walter Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz, eine kunstgeschichtliches Handbuch*, 6 Vols (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1940-1954), and Walter Horn, "Das Florentiner Baptisterium," in *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institute in Florenz*, 5/3, (Dicembre 1938): 100-151.

<sup>22</sup> Eg. Santi Apostoli, in existence in 1075, was begun around 1059 and it also contains capitals of the same order as the Baptistery. This also coincides with the documentation (Building costs, transfers of

1059 to 1090, and the attic and dome from 1090 to 1128.<sup>23</sup> It can be understood from this that although the dates are contested, there is some agreement that the exterior was completed in different stages—the attic being later than the two orders below—but there is some argument over the exact date of the exterior marble encrustation. This is made more difficult as the three external orders of the exterior do not correspond directly to the internal orders and neither are they structurally linked to the fabric of the building—hence the disputes and the broad timeframe allocated to their fabrication. To this difficulty must be added the fact that over the centuries many areas of marble have been replaced due damage from weather and pollution. Although it is probable that much of this repair involved a like for like replacement it may be that other more contemporary details were added during this process bringing in other issues relating to the idea of conservation and heritage from an early date—even though it was probably not thought of in this way at the time.

However, structural analysis of the interior confirms that the internal marble encrustation within the main column niches on the ground floor can be located coevally with the erection of the exterior walls sometime in the eleventh century;<sup>24</sup> Jacobsen would thus place it sometime between 1039 and 1059 (Figure 3 and 4). Morolli commented that the geometrical decoration of the internal lower order reflects the ‘constructional methods which guided the structural growth of the building’ creating a ‘geometrical surface with a different character to that of a screen of columns’.<sup>25</sup> However, the patterns vary from wall to wall and an interpretation of what this might mean will be given later. Whatever the exact meaning, the decoration clearly differs from the early-Christian or Byzantine work seen in the Lateran baptistery or at Ravenna—hence its later dating. Based on excavations from 1940 and 1970 reported by Pietramellara,

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funds etc). Walter Horn, "Romanesque Churches in Florence". *Art Bulletin* Vol. XXV No.2 (June 1943): 117.

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that although Horn studied with Panofsky his evaluations of the baptistery are more akin to connoisseurship, which Panofsky thought of as diagnostics rather than work engaging with historical concepts.

<sup>24</sup> Pietramellara, *Batistero*, 26-28.

<sup>25</sup> Morolli, "good antique style," 63 and 85.

Morolli suggested a series of dates for the construction of the interior, but also utilizes connoisseurship in his analysis of the stylistic evidence such as the similarity of the encrustation of Bishop Ranieri's tomb (1113) to the marble covering of the larger triple gallery arches (built in the initial construction phase of the eleventh century) which were then divided into two around the beginning of the twelfth century (Figure 5).<sup>26</sup> This contradicts Jacobson but either way results in a decorated exterior up to the top of the gallery (except for the balustrade mosaics which are from a later date) by the early twelfth century which is confirmed by the fact that the interior revetment was in place by around 1205 when the arm of St Philip was brought to the Baptistery before being transferred to the cathedral.<sup>27</sup>

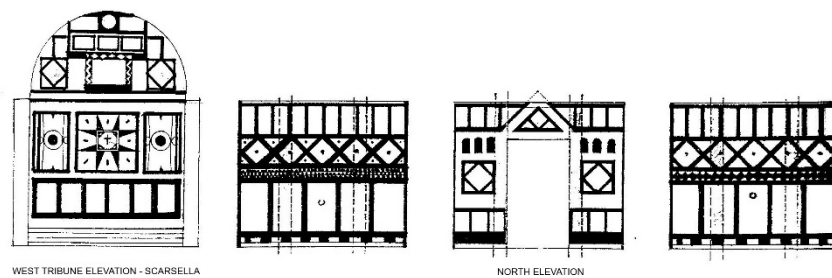


Figure 3 San Giovanni Internal Elevations 1

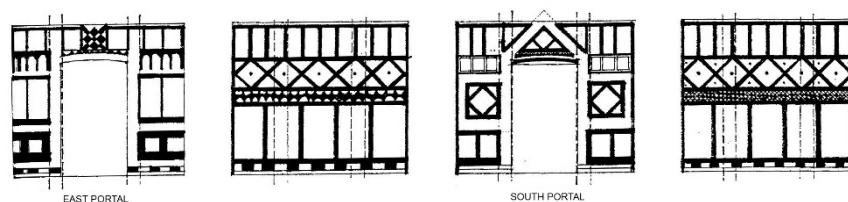


Figure 4 San Giovanni Internal Elevations 2

<sup>26</sup> Morolli, "good antique style," 91.

<sup>27</sup> Contemporary account described in Robert Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, (Florence: Sansoni, 1956), 1097





*Figure 5* View of mosaic of the cathedral in gallery above the east door



*Figure 6* Christ in majesty vault mosaic at the Baptistry of San Giovanni showing fragments of gallery paintings

The remaining mosaics—and some of the marbling—are from a later date along with the alternating saints and openings which form the base of the dome; most likely sometime in the thirteenth century (Figure 6). The square Scarsella chancel is recorded, again by Villani, to have replaced the



earlier semi-circular one in around 1202.<sup>28</sup> This is confirmed, again, by a stylistic analysis of the columns located in this area which also date from this period, about 150 years later than the columns in the main octagon.<sup>29</sup> This new addition to the building was accompanied by the laying of a new cosmatesque marble pavement<sup>30</sup> and the placement of a new font. Morolli stated that:

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The intarsia thus becomes an inherently Florentine metaphor of neo-Platonic harmony which continued at least until Leon Battista Alberti's Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre, for the Rucellai family, and the marble inlaid façade of the church of Santa Maria Novella [in the 15<sup>th</sup>].<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere in the Panini volume Anna Maria Giusti (art historian) remarks, in relation to the pavement, that theories that the zodiac was shifted from another location in the Baptistery at some point do not fit in with the evidence which argue for the significant areas all being completed at the same time.<sup>32</sup> Although much of her analysis is stylistic in character, the fact that many of the designs of the pavement appear to mimic carpet designs which would traditionally have been used for ceremonial occasions, has some validity. The problem is to establish whether this decoration was obscured by these traditional coverings or made to replace them—as Giusti argued may have been the case for the paintings in the gallery as well (see figure 6).<sup>33</sup> Morolli accounts for the development of the interior of the baptistery thus:

The work began with the chancel vault, which is associated with the still debated date of 1225, and the name of the Franciscan monk

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<sup>28</sup> The 1202 date is from Strozzi's copy of the Calimala books R. Davidsohn, *Forschungen zue älteren Geschichte von Florenz*, Vol 1, (Berlin: Mittler abd Sohn, 1896), 146.

<sup>29</sup> Morolli, "good antique style," 65.

<sup>30</sup> Pietramellara, *Batistero*, 30. This date is also confirmed by its similarity to the pavement at S.Miniato al Monte which is inscribed 1207

<sup>31</sup> Morolli, "good antique style," 110.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Maria Giusti, "The Baptistery Pavement," in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 379.

<sup>33</sup> Anna Maria Giusti, "The wall paintings of the Gallery," in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*.

Fra' Jacopo. Work then proceeded without interruption until the entire dome was decorated. This task of Michelangelo-like proportions continued throughout the thirteenth century ... It should be remembered that the new decoration of the Baptistery interior also extended to the walls of the gallery running along each of the faces of the octagon walls, originally painted to give the effect of a diochromatic marble facing ...<sup>34</sup>

Whoever completed the Scarsella ceiling mosaic (around 1275) may have also begun the main dome mosaic, as by Raimond van Marle's (Dutch art historian) examination of the design and the techniques used, it is likely to be from the same period or slightly later.<sup>35</sup> The next firm date is related to a document which shows that there was a collection of money in the city for the mosaic in 1272. It was still under way in 1301 when two of the artists were dismissed for appropriation of materials, and following a stylistic analysis, Van Marle suggests that it is possible that some of the work was by Gaddo Gaddi.<sup>36</sup> Paatz suggests, also following a stylistic analysis that some work may be by Coppo di Marcovaldo, who was active in Florence between 1261-1275, and some by a few of his pupils—notably Cimabue who was active from 1272-1302, but the whole mosaic may not have been finished until 1325.<sup>37</sup>

In more detailed accounts by Irene Hueck (PhD München, Art Historian) and Giusti—including careful analysis of the mosaic programme—both in the edited volume by Paolucci, it appears that the main dome and the Scarsella mosaics were begun some time later, *circa* 1265, and completed around the beginning of the fourteenth century when the remaining mosaic program was undertaken—including the balustrade panels and other internal friezes, as well as the mosaics evident in the

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<sup>34</sup> Morolli, "good antique style," 47. Raimond van Marle, *The Development of the Italian Schools Of Painting. Vol. I.* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1923), 262. Van Marle suggests that because the inscription mentions 'Saint Francis', who was still alive at the time, this reference to the canonisation is probably a later addition to the original inscription.

<sup>35</sup> Van Marle, *Italian Schools Of Painting. Vol. I.*, 262-270.

<sup>36</sup> Van Marle, *Italian Schools Of Painting. Vol. I.*, 265.

<sup>37</sup> Paatz, *Die Kirchen von Florenz*, 200.

gallery itself. The top register representing the angelic hierarchy (after Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite) which suggests knowledge of Ambrose's *Hexamaeron* where the angels were created prior to the visible world;<sup>38</sup> the large Christ figure and associated mosaics depicting angelic processions; the court of the virgin, Baptist and apostles; and the division of the saved and the fallen; are broadly of the same time as the Scarsella mosaics, completed around 1275.

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Given the large time span for the completion of the mosaics in the dome it would appear that internal scaffolding might have made the Baptistery almost unusable for almost half a century. Even if it were done in segments large areas would have been inaccessible unless the scaffolding was removed during the key feasts. But given that the most significant ceremonial use of the building was intermittent (covering about six weeks of the year from Easter to Whitsuntide) it is likely that work was carried out between these events, with the main vault mosaic emerging in sequence as if a curtain was being slowly raised on the stories from the Old and New Testaments all focused on the life of Christ but mediated, in the lowest register, through the life of John the Baptist, the 'city's sainted protector'.<sup>39</sup>

No documentary references have yet been found which relate to the paintings of the gallery, discovered in the late nineteenth century, which mimic the marble inlay below. They appear to have been over-painted by Buontalenti during his alterations to the interior in the sixteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The plaster under the mosaics in the gallery show traces of paint and thus suggests that this aspect of the decoration was completed before the fourteenth century. Giusti's stylistic analysis suggested a mid-thirteenth century date roughly contemporaneous with the beginning of the mosaics within the main building (following the decoration of the Scarsella). Edgar Anthony, writing in 1927 also placed them in the thirteenth century but suggested they were contemporary with the pavement based on the

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<sup>38</sup> Irene Hueck, "The Mosaic Programme," in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 238.

<sup>39</sup> Timothy Verdon, "The Baptistery of San Giovanni: A Religious Monument Serving the City", in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 22ff.

<sup>40</sup> Giusti, "The wall paintings," in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 363.

oriental patterns.<sup>41</sup> Either way they form a significant part of the extensive redecoration of the interior undertaken during the thirteenth century. Giusti argued that the apparently incomplete mosaics of the gallery were unfinished due to financial or political difficulties during the early part of the fourteenth century,<sup>42</sup> with the last date given for the completed mosaics above the East and South entrances as 1310. However, this thesis again can be questioned by a more open interpretation of the setting of the rite and the building.

In the end the differing opinions as to the sequence of the construction and finishing of the building still leave clear times of growth and stasis. But throughout this long period the rites which the building housed remained relatively constant.

### The Liturgical History

The two main rites in Italy of the thirteenth century were the Roman Rite and the Ambrosian Rite centred on Milan. Florence had some connection with both centres, with St Zenobius (337-417),<sup>43</sup> former bishop of Florence, described as a protégé of St Ambrose (330-397),<sup>44</sup> particularly in his fight against the Arian controversy of the time, and the Bishop of Florence, Gérard de Bourgogne, later Pope Nicholas II (1059-61), who, in an attempt to unify the Catholic rites, managed to subordinate Milan to Rome. The service in the *Ritus* is similar to the Gelasian Sacramentary XLII describing the Roman rite from around the eighth century.<sup>45</sup>

The *Ritus in ecclesia servandi* associated with the Cathedral of S. Reparata and the Baptistery of San Giovanni was originally composed after this unification in the late twelfth century (between 1173 and 1205)<sup>46</sup> and was used with the *Mores et consuetudines canonice florentine*, written in

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<sup>41</sup> Edgar Waterman Anthony, *Early Florentine Architecture and Decoration*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 19.

<sup>42</sup> 'The decline in the fortunes of both the Calimala Guild and of the art of mosaic work in Florence, led to the abandonment of this ambitious project, leaving to us instead this rare and evocative example of wall painting'. Giusti, "The Wall Paintings," in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 363-71.

<sup>43</sup> St Zenobius Feast Day 25<sup>th</sup> May.

<sup>44</sup> St Ambrose Feast Day 7<sup>th</sup> December.

<sup>45</sup> E.C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 229.

<sup>46</sup> Toker, *On Holy Ground*, 30.

the early thirteenth century by the Florentines (c.1230), to organize and structure their festive calendar.

Baptisms were held on significant feast days relating to the life of Christ. The main day was Easter Saturday, and when total immersion was practiced, catechumens were immersed three times representing the Trinity, but more significantly, the three days Jesus spent in the tomb. When baptismal practice developed into partial immersion or affusion, this threefold action was continued within the rite even if the catechumen was no longer fully submerged or 'entombed' by water within the rite.

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On Holy Saturday the service began in the cathedral with the *Making of a Catechumen* at around 9am (after Tierce) with the boys assembled in the south aisle (to the right facing the altar) and the Girls in the north aisle (to the left). At this point the catechumens were questioned and they recited the Creed and a priest made the sign of the cross on their foreheads. Following this the priest said a prayer *Ne te latet* (Be not deceived, Satan ...). Then each child was touched on the nose and ears with their own saliva, the priest reciting the *Effeta quod* (That is, be opened, unto the odour of sweetness ...). Then the priest touched the shoulders and breasts with holy oil asking *Abrenuntias Satane* (Do you renounce Satan?). He then placed his hand on each of them saying *Credo in deum* and walked in a circle around them. The deacon then recited *Orate electi flectite genua* (Pray, you elect, and bow the knee ...) followed by *Levate complete* (Rise, be filled with the Holy Spirit ...). Finally the archdeacon said *Catechumini recedant* (Let the catechumens go ...) and the catechumens left the church. It is important to understand here that although many of the congregation would not have understood Latin perfectly, they would have recognized key words, prayers, readings and many of the actions undertaken by the priests and in addition to this, the processional aspects of the service promoted everyone to the level of participant; they were all involved, only the degree of engagement varied.

Then followed ten lessons drawn from the Old Testament related to the Creation and the prophets before the whole congregation formed a procession to 'the font' in the baptistery behind the cross and blessed candle, which, from a single flame lights all the candles used in the

ceremony, with the priests following at the rear.<sup>47</sup> Seven litanies were said during this procession until the font was reached where a further five were said. The bishop would then say *Dominus vobiscum* and bless and consecrate the font before baptizing those catechumens present. Although there are few instructions written in the documentation for the priest's actions during these acts he certainly would have made the sign of the cross over the water, and varied the volume and timbre of his voice at particular points of the service.

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It is difficult to ascertain whether baptism involved the full or partial immersion of the children or whether, by the latter part of the thirteenth century, affusion had become the preferred method. However, in either case the consecrated water was administered on the catechumen three times with a question related to the Trinity at each stage, followed by the making of the sign of the cross on the forehead with the Chrism (holy oil).

Following the baptisms<sup>48</sup> the procession returned to the cathedral chanting the three litanies in the same order as they were said in approaching the font. The *Kyrie Eleison* was then sung followed by the *Confiteor* and then the mass. After mass the priest began the *Gloria in excelsis deo* joined by a peal of the church bells which echoed throughout the city.

## Political History

Only in Central and Northern Italy (between 1125-1325) did the public cult focus on a revival of the ancient practice of mass Easter

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<sup>47</sup> This processional link between the two churches was not limited to baptismal rites. Processions also took place on the Sunday after Easter, the Feast of St Philip and James as well as Ash Wednesday and during Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, for instance, the procession would gather in the 'atrium' between the cathedral and the baptistery—perhaps referring to the cemetery which surrounded San Giovanni until further burial was prohibited in 1293-95—before continuing to the baptistery. Toker, *On Holy Ground*, 50.

<sup>48</sup> The number of infants baptised in Florence on Holy Saturday would have been relatively large as, according to Sicardus of Cremona, only Holy Saturday and the Pentecost Vigil (50 days later) were appropriate days for the rite (unless the child was in danger of dying) because 'on the two great feasts of redemption, the true baptizer of Christians was Christ himself, in whose death and Resurrection the redeemed shared'. Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325*, (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2005), 312. This means that on average there would have been around six times as many children baptized on Easter Saturday as on the Pentecost Vigil.

baptisms conducted by the bishop. Elsewhere in Europe the dioceses were simply too large for such consolidation.<sup>49</sup>

This observation partially accounts for the very singular set of buildings produced during a limited period in medieval Italy. The fact that the sacrament of baptism warranted the erection of such grand monuments suggests that, at the time, baptism was more than just an initiation into Christian life it was an initiation into the communal body of the city. On a practical level, the size and grandeur of the new baptisteries often led to an inevitable rebuilding of the associated cathedral within an enlarged and charged urban setting, the pair becoming both house of the bishop and the parish church of the *citade*. During this period the baptistery—symbolically the gateway to the Catholic Church as well as to citizenship of the locality where the building was situated—was perceived both pragmatically and paradigmatically as a triumphal entry point into the religion and the City of God; the Neophyte became a citizen of the Holy Roman Empire represented by both the church and the civic rule of the town or city:

Baptism made the children citizens of both the commune and of heaven. At Easter the commune renewed itself and reaffirmed its identity as a sacred society. These rites came to be so closely associated with republican identity that they were amongst the first things to go as princes established seigniorial rule in the early 1300's.<sup>50</sup>

Many of the large baptistery buildings in Italy that were either built or extended during the thirteenth century are situated in the area where the city communes thrived.<sup>51</sup> These cities began to develop as self-governing entities as the German kings and the Holy Roman Emperor found it more

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson, *Cities of God*, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, *Cities of God*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Baptisteries which underwent large building programmes alongside the developing politics of the city republics of Italy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were: Ascoli Piceno, Asti, Bari, Cremona, Florence, Padua, Parma, Pisa, Treviso, Ventimiglia, Verona, with Siena and Volterra appearing in the early thirteenth. Thompson, *Cities of God*, 29.

difficult to enforce their rule. In the wake of this virtual retreat, the aristocracy that was left in control comprised mainly Langobard, Frankish, Saxon and Swabian nobles (including over 25% of the bishops who often ran the cities for the German kings).<sup>52</sup> These nobles attempted to sustain their rule but conflicts soon developed between these lords and native Italians, with the clergy taking whichever side supported their best interests—in some cases offering church land and titles to locals in order to gain their allegiance. But what makes this particular situation so different from elsewhere in Europe is that nearly all of these cities had Roman—or earlier—foundations:

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In central and upper Italy this meant about forty different sites. The peninsula's urban-civic traditions had survived even in the north despite the devastating invasions of the sixth and eighth centuries.<sup>53</sup>

Thus the new aristocracy, contrary to the trends elsewhere in feudal Europe, remained in the city and created other lower ranking knights to run their landholdings. This strategy soon led to internecine conflicts which were fuelled further by the increasing presence of the freemen of the city—the *cives* (money lenders, merchants, notaries, freeholders and some tradesmen)—who demanded a position higher than the unskilled workers of the commune—the *popolino*. At different times over the next few years different factions from the middle and upper ranks of society controlled the cities as communes, where an association of freemen held some collective public authority.

In Florence this development began after the city began to reassert itself as a critical trading point in the region following the disastrous Langobard and Ostrogothic invasions of the fourth and eighth centuries. Although Martines suggests that first firm date for a commune in Florence is 1138,<sup>54</sup> signs that it was already acting with some autonomy are evident

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<sup>52</sup> Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City States in renaissance Italy*, (Maryland: John Hopkins Uni. Press, 1979/88), 10.

<sup>53</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 18.



from much earlier. In 1035-37—two years before the beginning of the construction of the new baptistery—Giovanni Gualberto, supported by Emperor Conrad II, had preached against the corruption of the church in Florence, and in 1054—five years before its consecration 1059—pope Victor II held a council in Santa Reparata reviewing corruption within the church as a whole. These events, occurring in Florence and supported by the civic authorities, signalled a clear intention by both city and church to counter local acts of simony and the enlargement of the Baptistery would have been a very potent symbol of this new beginning. The fact that the Emperor Henry III placed the city under his direct control, away from the local nobility, also suggests the governing body of the city was well trusted and moving towards greater independence.

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As Florence gained status its population began to grow, causing some conflict with the feudal family who owned most of the landscape surrounding the city, at one point during the middle of the twelfth century resulting in a papal interdict, removed only when property seized was returned to the lord. This event is one of many over the next century which saw the city form allegiances for and against the emperor and the pope, all the time continuing the development of the city and its self-representation. Soon after the completion of the first set of commune walls (built from 1173-75), in 1177, they were back in favor with the pontiff defeating Frederick Barbarossa at the battle of Ascanio. By this time the population of Florence was about 50,000 and was governed by consuls and the *podestà*,<sup>55</sup> who was at this point often appointed by the Emperor, and although bloody battles between Florentine families—common and noble—were frequent, it was this influence of the emperor on the government of the city which was most resented. In 1202 this led Florentine troops to attack and finally destroy Otto the Fourth's stronghold of Semifonte, much reducing local imperial power and enabling Florence's influence to spread well beyond the limits of the city walls. It is perhaps not surprising then that this resulted in

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<sup>55</sup> The role of the *podestà* was central to the government of the early communes. They were generally nobles from different cities skilled in organisation by without allegiances within the city they helped govern. Their appointment was for a fixed term and ultimately that had to account for their period of rule before they were allowed to leave the city upon completion of their term of government.

the second great phase of building the baptistery which continued throughout the century. Increased influence meant increased revenue and the Calimala guild, at that time in control of the upkeep of the baptistery, would have been in a position to invest heavily in the development of this iconic structure.

The thirteenth century in Florence was a time of development and change. By the end of the century the population had nearly doubled and from 1283 a new, much expanded, set of commune walls were erected which more or less define the limits of the city throughout the Renaissance period. This expansion created its own pressures on the governing of the commune and over the century many battles continued to occur; the emergence of the Guelf (supporters of the papacy) and Ghibelline (supporters of the emperor) conflict which carried on well into the next century; war with neighbouring cities such as Siena; but in 1250, following the defeat of the emperor's supporters who had been ruling the city, a new government of the *primo popolo* was convened which, for the first time gave a share of the power to the wealthy trading classes. The period of peace this initiated was relatively short lived as the city declared war on its neighbours soon after, but it was a period recalled nostalgically by Dante some years later, as a period of modesty and fraternity. This productive period gave birth to the Florin and also supported the building of the Bargello, Florence's first public *palazzo* for the *capitano del popolo* as well as the continuing mosaic decoration to the baptistery. It could be that the mosaics in the gallery depicting city dignitaries are actually portraits of the key figures of the period responsible for the civic organization of the commune, placed in a similar relationship to the city (i.e. on the inside of the south wall which faces the body of the city) as the relics depicted in the corresponding east facing mosaic (placed in a mosaic of the cathedral on the inside of the east wall facing the cathedral—see figure 5), are to the cathedral. The mosaics would then work alongside the variations of the internal revetment below which, facing east appears to represent the structure of the cathedral and south, the fabric of the city.

Although the Florentines lost the battle of Montaperti to Siena in 1260, and the period of the *primo popolo* ended ushering in a period of rule

governed by the emperor and his appointed *podestà*, the pope soon intervened and by 1267 the city was again governed by the Guelf party along similar republican lines as before. By 1282, in an attempt to try to reconcile the two warring factions, the roles of the *podestà* and consuls were supplemented by the introduction of guilds into the governing mechanisms of the city. Initially these representatives came from the seven greater guilds (judges and notaries, cloth refiners, money changers, woollen cloth manufacturers, doctors and druggists, silk and haberdashers, furriers), and the five middle guilds (the *baldrigari*—second hand clothing and linen, butchers, cobblers, masons and woodworkers, blacksmiths) but not the lower guilds (including, vintners, saddlers, innkeepers, bakers, oil merchants, locksmiths, armourers and sword makers, leather workers and the remaining second hand dealers). The difference in numbers allowed the upper guilds to out vote the middle guilds and thus wield more power. This period again saw a great increase in building activity within the city, the new *duomo* was begun and the cemetery around the baptistery was removed and the area paved, allowing the occupation of ever greater and more elaborate festivals and pageants. This development along with the extension of the mendicant churches, the grain market and the town hall—the Palazzo Vecchio (also called the Palazzo Signoria after the government of the city, or the Palazzo dei Priori after the nine members of the Signoria who were called the *Priori*)—all testified to a prosperous, confident and progressive city, sure of its own value and place within Italy.

The struggles, of course, continued with Dante himself being exiled in 1302 but although there had been occasions when buildings in the city were attacked and burnt, for most of the time the city and its buildings, the urban topography, the festivals, and the basic social hierarchies underpinning the urban order allowed various forms of rule—formed from the strata of various cameras, committees and councils—under different regimes to build on each other without demolishing buildings constructed alongside the emerging challenges of civic governance.

# Conclusion: The Architect as Historian or 'Architectural History'

Following this brief description of the current scholarship relating to the Florence in the thirteenth century it is still unclear what we could consider to be of 'primary' importance in our understanding of the relationship between the Baptistery and the city. It is only when the experience of the building is considered that some new insights begin to appear. It is clear that the Baptistery of San Giovanni was not conceived as an object for public veneration but as a setting for highly articulated baptismal ceremonies as well as other significant civic ceremonies (such as the feast of San Giovanni) and its expansion and development during the thirteenth century suggests a growing interest in its significance to Florence itself. This is confirmed by the pre 1293 image from the Chigi manuscript of Villani's *Chronicle* which depicts the baptistery as the only surviving building following Totila's siege of the sixth century (Figure 7). Placed at the heart of the community and contributing to its overall identity, this representational duality resulted in the baptistery becoming a 'republican shrine' as well as a Christian building and is confirmed by the fact that when the princes superseded the government of the communes they 'purged the baptistery of its communal paraphernalia, removing and destroying votive images, banners and candle offerings from the republican regime'.<sup>56</sup>

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Figure 7 Manuscript Illustration of Totila razing the walls of the city, only the baptistery remains. Chigi MS of Villani's Cronica pre 1293

<sup>56</sup> Thompson, *Cities of God*, 28.

This act of revisionism suggests that by the time that the princes had gained enough power to patronize the baptistery their understanding of political representation was more significant than their fear of being charged with any form of iconoclasm. But it also suggests that much of the work done to the fabric of the baptistery during the thirteenth century may have been partially oriented towards the commune rather than just to the church. The late mosaics in the gallery indicate the beginning of this trend. The internal elevation of the eastern doors to the baptistery is surrounded by two-tone marble encrustation which represents the architectonic elements of the cathedral it confronts. Above this, the late mosaic (c.1250s-1310) offers a more refined representation of the cathedral inhabited by the saints it houses in the reliquary. By the same token, the internal face of the southern entry facing the city is surrounded by architectonic elements and gates (*urbs*), and the mosaic above, busts of the civic dignitaries who run the commune (*civitas*). It appears from the dating of the building that these are some of the last additions to the interior of the baptistery, with later works concentrating on the thresholds (beginning with the Pisano doors in 1330) and the area immediately outside the building (the raising of the piazza began in the last decade of the thirteenth century). This setting of the gallery mosaics and internal walls of the baptistery suggests that there were no more mosaics required to complete the program as the west and north faces of the building are far less significant in their relationship to the topography of the city. Indeed, this shift towards the relationship of the building to the city coincides with the emergence of the Corpus Christi processions in the early fourteenth century. These processions had been present in many cities from as early as 1264 but in most places they did not develop into significant urban festivals involving the guilds and other civic institutions until after a papal decree of 1311.<sup>57</sup> So it is not unlikely that at this point in the history of the city of Florence the relationship of the baptismal rite to the initiation into the commune was significantly more

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<sup>57</sup> Terence Bailey, *The Processions of Sarum and the Western Church*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1971), 117.

complicated and politically charged. There was no longer one city but a complex political landscape where, like Dante, you could easily find yourself on the losing side of a conflict and exiled from the very place you had been initiated into the church and Holy Roman Empire.

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But this increasing politicization of the baptistery could also account for some of the changes in the rite of baptism itself in relation to its setting within the building. The shift from immersion to affusion may have been due to increased numbers of catechumens, but it may also indicate a broadening of the iconographic potential of the event within the city, reducing the significance of the baptismal room in the overall initiation; it may have been more important to show allegiance to a particular faction within the city rather than to the city or the church itself. By 1577 when the central font was removed by Bernardo Buontalenti to make way for new decorations for the baptism of Prince Filippo, first born to Grand Duke Francesco,<sup>58</sup> the significance of the rite would have already altered significantly. Although Toker suggests that this font, had been there since 1128 when the new building was raised, the dating of the font panels in the museum contradict this, placing the final version contemporaneous with the screen at San Miniato al Monte, the building of the new Scarsella chapel and the laying of the existing cosmatesque pavement (circa 1200-1205).<sup>59</sup> This layout, with an octagonal presbytery, was reconstructed by Giuseppe Castellucci in 1921 and offers an opportunity to evaluate the relationship of the rite to the building in a very clear manner.

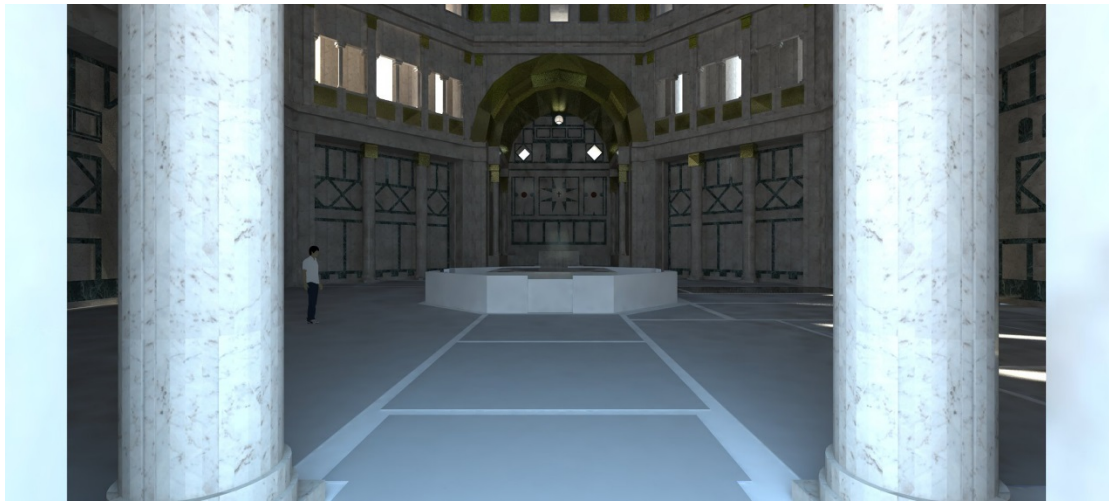
With the assistance of one of my students a sequence of computer images has been produced of the interior with this font which indicates that the approach to the font would offer different images of parts of the building reflected in the water (Figures 8-12). There are different theories regarding how people entered and left the building during the sacrament and with so many people in the building on Easter Saturday and the eve of Epiphany it is difficult to establish exactly what these reflections would have been to the various participants in the ritual but it appears that as the font

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<sup>58</sup> Mirko Tavoni, "On Dante's Baptismal Font" in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 205.

<sup>59</sup> Enrica Neri Lusanna, "The original arrangement of the presbytery and the Baptismal font. Theories surrounding the remains," in Paolucci, *The Baptistery*, 191.

was approached much of the internal revetment, up to and including gallery level, would have been reflected in the surface prior to a segment of the vault mosaic and finally the reflection of light itself from the lantern. These reflections in the font, just like the iconography of the building, would have varied from matter to heavenly light via material, geometry, proportion, numerology and image, but would have all been present in the same place—the font where the mystery of the sacrament of baptism was also seen to occur.



*Figure 8* View of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Font from the west entrance



*Figure 9* View towards the font from first circular paving stone

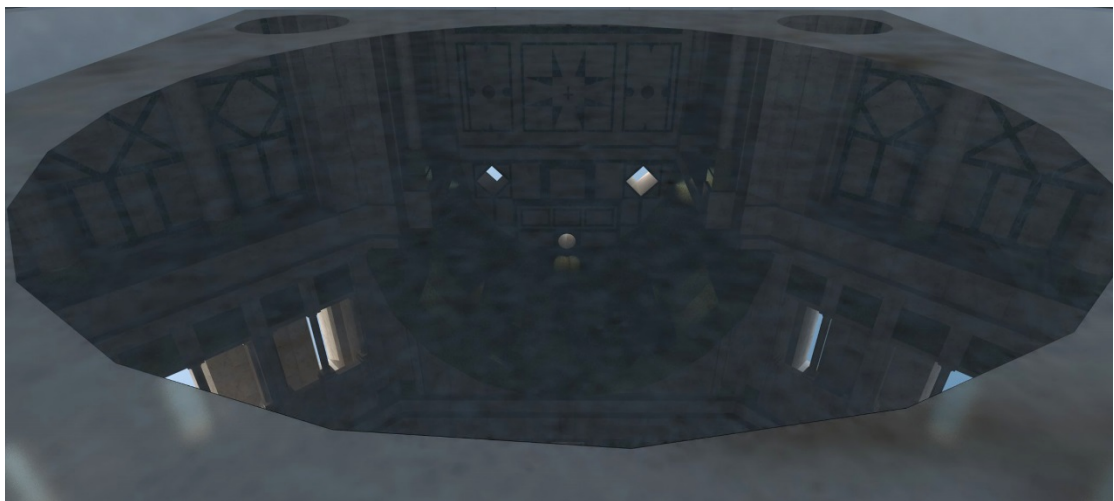




*Figure 10* View towards font standing at the centre of the zodiac



*Figure 11* View of reflection in font from entry to presbytery



*Figure 12* 10 Reflection in water when standing next to the font



This magical transformation of the various reflected images (particularly if approached from the east)—changing from stone, through the image of Christ, to light itself—offer a compelling narrative for the initiation of the catechumen into the death of the old (Adam) and resurrection of the new (Christ), and argue, as the introduction suggests, for an architectural history where in order to understand the buildings of the past historians as well as architects should be educated, instructed in geometry, history, philosophy, music, medicine, law, astronomy and the theory of the heavens, but more critically, be aware that architecture should be understood as the embodiment of practical wisdom, something which brings the universal to the particular—in this case the grounding of Heavenly Jerusalem emerging from the political realities of quattrocento Florence.

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There are still many questions which surround this significant building—such as the reasons behind the alteration to the Scarsella—which may benefit from similar studies. However, it is clear from this exercise that although there may be some dangers inherent to the process of interpreting the buildings, spaces and cities of history, the resultant objectification which results from the limited perspective of much orthodox historical review is far more problematic.

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## Embracing the Variability of Time and New Media

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by Rosanne Altstatt

Shakespeare's ode to the immortality of rhyme has not entirely held true in Sonnet 55. The Bard berates "sluttish time" for wreaking havoc on marble and gilded monuments and praises the immortality of rhyme. His words endure, but their meanings have changed. "Sluttish time" now has less to do with a lazy housemaid who cannot keep the furniture clean than a girl who gets around. A partial solution to the preservation of beauty may found in the contemporary practices of visual artist who design artworks with variable media and conservationists who turn to methodologies of variable media for preservation. If constancy was a great virtue of beauty in the Elizabethan era, the possibility of multiplying layers of meaning that inconstancy and time engender is an ideal for the current age.

### Sonnet 55

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone besmear'd with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Its claims notwithstanding, Shakespeare's ode to the immortality of rhyme has not entirely held up over time. His words endure, but their meanings have changed. "Sluttish time" now has less to do with a lazy housemaid who cannot keep the furniture clean than a girl who gets around. (Then again, the "Real Housewives of New Jersey" may unite the Elizabethan meaning with the contemporary usage.) The Bard planted double entendres throughout his verse, but five hundred years have worn away some layers of meaning and left mostly ribaldry for readers of this line in today's linguistic context.

However, this change is not truly detrimental to Shakespeare since one knows to have the Oxford English Dictionary on hand when reading his work, and the discovery of old meanings is a source of joy for contemporary readers. While the Elizabethan era saw time as having an ill effect on art and architecture, 18<sup>th</sup> century English gardens frequently included picturesque "ruins," using time (or the illusion of time) to add meaning to place. Since the latter half of the twentieth century the visual arts have embraced the passage of time. This development is particularly apparent in intentionally ephemeral art such as land art, sculpture and installation with degradable materials, and performance art.

Variable media artworks of the late twentieth century and today that use electronic and digital media as artistic media embrace time as an element that creates a variable in form and format. As digital devices, operating systems, hardware equipment and software codes rapidly change; artworks that use these elements as their medium are being "migrated" or updated to the newest media or new software is developed to emulate an original, outdated software. At times this is the work of a conservator or curator, but it can also be accounted for in the artist's initial design.

Variability, its limitations and mutating possibilities, addresses questions of the functionality and meaning of artistic mediums as they age, the effects of losing or updating an artwork's medium, and new media art from the standpoint of works created in variable media for varying contexts. Work in this area of art theory and conservation was spearheaded by Variable Media Network (VMN). This group discusses methodologies, standards and tools in order to analyze and demonstrate how artworks with

variables in their execution subtly change in meaning when they migrate from medium to medium.<sup>60</sup> The main focus of VMN is electronic art, though its research spreads to the variability in a pile of wrapped candy that gallery visitors can take from Felix Gonzalez-Torres *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991).<sup>61</sup>

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In 2004 the Variable Media Network organized the exhibition *Seeing Double: Emulation in Theory and Practice* along with a symposium at the Guggenheim Museum and in conjunction with the Daniel Langlois Foundation.<sup>62</sup> The exhibition dealt with the challenges of and possible solutions to preserving inherently variable art. This process is fraught with pitfalls and difficult decisions about preservation, particularly when an artist is no longer available for consultation. Historically, the hardware involved in realizing new media art—television monitors, film and video projectors—as well as software programs have been considered interchangeable and not preserved as part of a video or computer artwork.<sup>63</sup> A museum displays a video on the monitor or projector it has on hand if it is acceptable to the artist, with budgets being a common reason behind the final choice. As these works age and new technologies develop, artists and institutions must negotiate and decide how to preserve existing technologies or “migrate” the work to a new technology.

Conservators are increasingly aware of how a change in electronic technology is a change in medium and that this, in turn, affects content. A television is not just a screen, for instance, and when the rest of its parts contribute to the reception of an artwork’s content, the original medium may not be interchangeable. A seemingly simple television piece illustrates the problem at its extreme: “To re-create **TV Crown** [1965] for Paik’s 2000

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<sup>60</sup> Alain Depocas, “Goals of the Variable Media Network,” in *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, eds. Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), 66.

<sup>61</sup> See “case studies,” in Depocas, *Permanence Through Change*, 70-114.

<sup>62</sup> “Seeing Double: Emulation in Theory and Practice,” Variable Media Network, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.variablemedia.net/e/welcome.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe collects antiquated video equipment and instituted the Labor für antiquierte Videosysteme in 2004. Restored video hardware is used to play historical video for transfer and viewing on current technologies. See *Record again! 40Jahre Videokunst.de—Teil 2*, eds. Christoph Blase and Peter Weibel (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

Guggenheim retrospective, the artist's long-time collaborator Jung Sung Lee performed the same manipulation [with magnets to distort the image] with a contemporary television set to produce a result comparable to the original. This re-creation is more a migration to new hardware than an emulation of old hardware; however, if flat screens replace cathode-ray tubes in the future, the day will come when an off-the-shelf TV set will no longer permit such manipulation."<sup>64</sup>

It is conceivable that the interchangeable elements of *TV Crown* and any other artwork interacting with hardware specific to a certain era will become *de facto* non-interchangeable as time passes and technology evolves. That the flat screen mentioned above will "no longer permit such manipulation" is an understatement: the artwork is unrealizable if a cathode-ray tube television is absent. The available medium has been changed by the market and, in this case, the artwork incapacitated. Evidently there are limits to the variability of media in a work of (media) art.

Variability has been a strong factor in new media art from early on. Curator Rudolf Frieling notes in the essay "Form Follows Format," how "a work could be presented contextually in all kinds of new configurations: Nam June Paik's *Global Groove* transformed itself in the 1970s from a television work into a linear videotape and finally into the multiplied pictorial material for his video installation *TV Garden*, Bill Seaman presented *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* (1991/1994) first as a videotape and then as a projected installation, finally as an interactive new configuration on CD-ROM and as a room installation. New formatting, it seems, is an essential aspect of media art."<sup>65</sup> There are two reasons why media art lends itself to changing format from one electronic medium to the next. The first is that outside of art purposes, electronic data is designed for transfer across platforms, from one device to the next. A contemporary example is how the Internet can be accessed on everything from a home entertainment system

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<sup>64</sup> "Nam June Paik," Variable Media Network, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.variablemedia.net/e/seeingdouble/index.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Rudolf Frieling, "Form Follows Format: Tensions, Museums, Media Technology, and Media Art," Medienkunstnetz, 2004, accessed August 15, 2013, [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview\\_of\\_media\\_art/museum/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/museum/).

to a handheld device. The artists Frieling cites seize this opportunity to translate a contemporary culture of variability into their work. Variability is a challenge for artists to coax out different aspects of a concept in various formats and contexts as they develop over time.

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A less conceptual reason is marketing strategy. Sometimes a work can be better sold or fit into an important exhibition if it is made in a form that fits the goals of the venue. A video may be accepted for a specific exhibition if it can be modified into a multi-channel installation, while a screening demands a single-channel work. These factors in the decision-making process of how to form and re-form an artwork are “real world” concerns. A work of art re-formatted for better marketing can be intellectually cut back. One might suspect this is happening when references to a performance are sold as secondary documentary photographs; a large installation is re-made on a smaller scale with objects that are priced individually and may not hold up as well on their own or when a single-channel video on a monitor is blown up to a large projection without gaining anything more than square footage.

Variability is integral to the concept of the computer virus *Biennale.py* (2001) by the Austrian art collective 0100101110101101.org. The source code is its core and exists in cyberspace (fig. 1), yet the forms it takes are not all electronic. It has been printed on T-Shirts, spread from person to person by those who read the shirts or share them in a metaphorical relation to the biological virus being passed from body to body (fig. 2). In an art context the T-shirt makes a connection between banning the proliferation of (viral) source code and the censorship of art. In another variation the artists load *Biennale.py* on a disk or hard drive and exhibit it on a computer “contained” under protective glass in a vitrine-like variation for gallery contexts, *Perpetual Self Dis/Infecting Machine* (2001-2004, fig. 3). Each variation of form and context plays a role in renegotiating meaning.



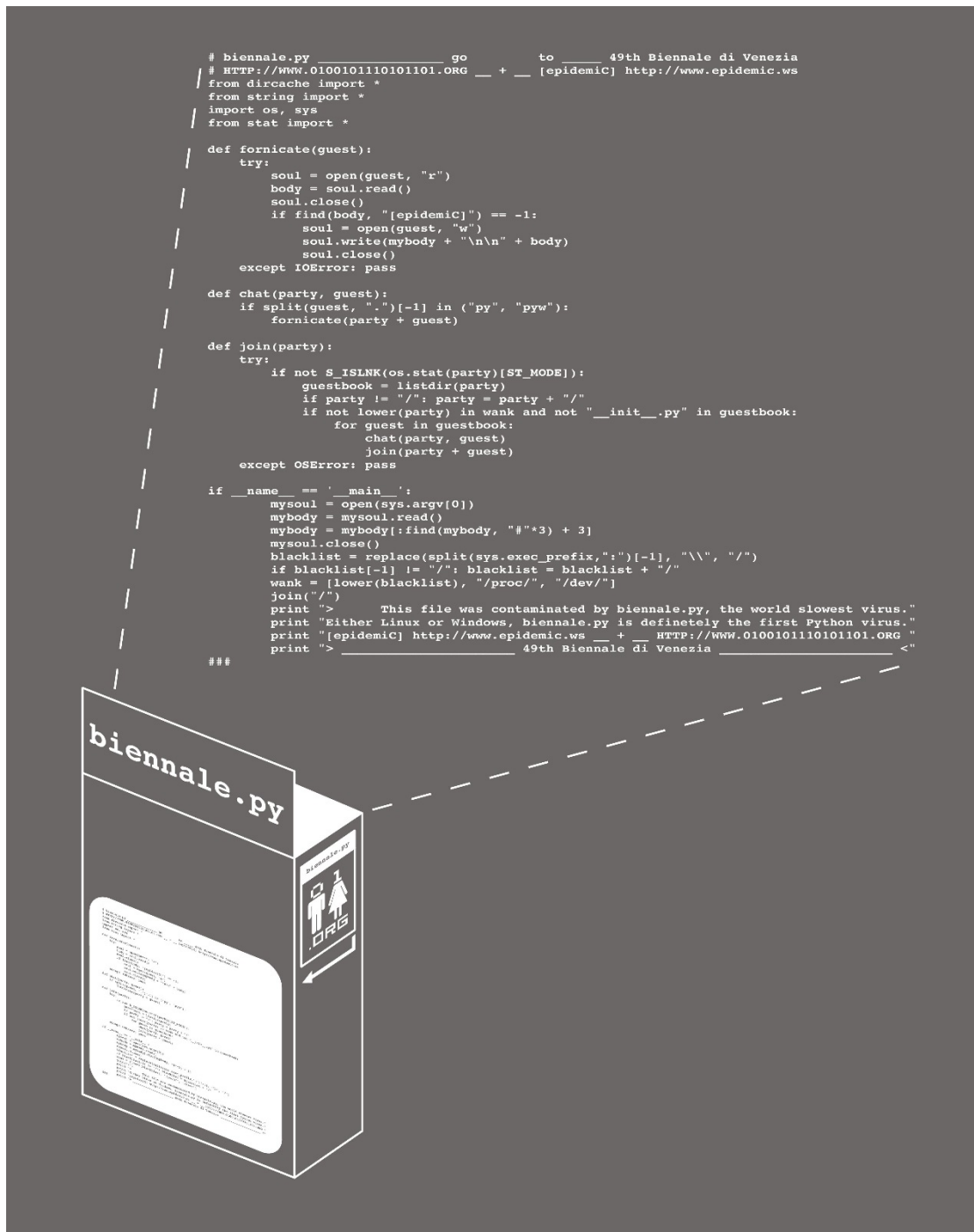


Figure 1 Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org, *Biennale.py*, 2001, Computer drawing with source code for virus, dimensions variable, © Eva and Franco Mattes



Figure 2 Mattes Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org, *Perpetual Self Dis/Infecting Machine*, 2001-2004, Custom made computer infected with Biennale.py virus, 70 x 50 x 13 cm, © Eva and Franco Mattes



Figure 3 Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org , *Biennale.py*, 2001, T-shirts with *Biennale.py* code printed on front, dimensions variable, © Eva and Franco

*Biennale.py* is an artwork and an event that was released as part of the spectacle of the 43rd Venice Biennial. The commissioned artwork spread it from the Slovenian Pavilion, contextualizing a work of potentially criminal feat of computer engineering as an artwork and unleashing it by loading it from a CD onto a computer into the world demonstrates its functionality outside the art context. Conversely, the virus also contextualizes the exhibition from where it was released as part of a global communication network that reaches beyond the art world. The artwork highlights how the network is filled with volatile communication and risk, and this is true for the field of art as well. Here, risk is not limited to a computer virus losing or stealing data but lies in finding aesthetic means of communication that challenge and simultaneously enhance it.

Computer viruses awaken the fear of destruction, and placing them in the context of art makes no exception.<sup>66</sup> Viruses, harmful or not, are a humanizing mark on a digital system. *Biennale.py* is neither a symbol nor harmless because it crashes any vulnerable operating system it encounters. Yet the artists distributed the “antidote” in the form of a patch to major developers of anti-virus software such as McAfee before *Biennale.py* was released. While it can cause damage, this can be prevented or repaired. The artwork does not remain within the boundaries of representation, but rather crosses into action with direct consequences both inside and outside the realm of art. On a T-shirt, it highlights art as speech—free speech—and communicative, while worn on the body and integrated into the wardrobe of people’s lives. Housed as a computer running software under glass in a museum, it is an art object with its functional danger contained, reflecting the perceived containment of art in an institution.

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The historical context of *Biennale.py* is important because it was released in the aftermath of the ILOVEYOU computer virus that had wreaking havoc upon computers worldwide during the preceding year. The frenzied manner of ILOVEYOU news media coverage and cybersecurity was itself a spectacle and the artists put forth that they intended to incite a public performance of media hysteria.<sup>67</sup> Calling on new media art’s history of criticality toward mass media, *Biennale.py* taps into the fear that viral code invites and explores the relationship between society’s dependency on computers and the technophobic angst that is derived from code illiteracy.

### Beauty in Inconstancy

Upon a first reading of Sonnet 55, it seems that rhyme is praised because of its ability to pass down the legend of a woman’s beauty against the wear of time. Yet no image of a woman is described by the wordsmith for the “lovers’ eyes,” no fair skin or golden hair. Here the real object of beauty is

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<sup>66</sup> Funders sometimes express nervousness that their company networks will be hacked or electronically invaded if they are associated with exhibitions addressing these subjects. This was the case during preparation of the exhibition *System Disruption* (2004) while this author was Artistic Director of Edith Russ Haus for Media Art.

<sup>67</sup> Eva and Franco Mattes aka 0100101110101101.org. “Bienale.py” *Rhizome*. March 7, 2008, accessed August 15, 2013, <http://rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/47669/>.

word and rhyme, their greatest attribute a classical tenet of female beauty, constancy.

The traditional Western sense of beauty still exists, but it no longer reigns as a supreme ideal and aesthetics now includes “ugly” as beautiful. *Biennale.py* combines a mathematician’s appreciation for beauty in numbers and a computer programmer’s appreciation for zeroes and ones to build a functioning, powerful program, inserting the computer virus into the contemporary discourse on art as the beauty of source code. Multiplicity is virtue rather than vice and inconstancy of form is not a trait of someone or something that cannot be trusted, but of endless possibilities.

Variable media art embraces a beauty of inconstant form, but a constant conceptual core is still valued as necessary in retaining the intention and identity of the work. As curators and conservators, VMN asks artists to describe the essential traits of individual artworks in order to build a foundation for future presentation when the original media are no longer available or detract from a still-contemporary concept with dated technology. The conservation strategy of variable media allows for works to “migrate” from an old format to new ones.

Beauty lies here in the multiple ways that form can fit content. To create an artwork with purposefully variable media is to calculate that time will bring technological change that will ultimately alter form and contextual change that will shift emphases of meaning. Shakespeare’s vow to his object of praise: “But you shall shine more bright in these contents/Than unswept stone besmear’d with sluttish time,” is a promise made to content itself by artists who use variable media. Use of current electronic media may accurately reflect a contemporary dynamic, but technology quickly ages and runs the risk of making the work historical at best, nostalgically “retro,” or passé at worst. Time may imbue an outdated technological medium with an aura that was never intended, changing or eclipsing other aspects of an artwork’s content. Leaving the door to variations in media leaves the door open to new iterations of the work and refresh the original concept in with new form.

## Evolution Over Time

Allowing for variation has introduced a character of evolution to artworks. Abramović and Ulay's *Nightsea Crossing*, a series of twenty-two performances between 1981 and 1987 could be described as a forerunner to Marina Abramović 2010 performance *The Artist is Present* at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, but it is more accurate to call this new work an evolution the same piece through variation.

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During *Nightsea Crossing* Abramović and Ulay, then partners in life and work, sat across from one another and silently stared at each other for ninety minutes.<sup>68</sup> Two decades after the duo's breakup, Abramović made what had been Ulay's chair available to the public for *The Artist is Present*. Anyone visiting the exhibition could wait in line to sit opposite the chair artist inhabited during all opening hours of the museum. The love, the antagonism, the endurance, and the intimacy that had been invested by the pair into the stare of *Nightsea Crossing*, now took place between one woman and the anonymous members of her audience.

*Nightsea Crossing* was present for live audiences that watched the pair on site and given an afterlife in photo documentation. When *The Artist is Present* took place, technology had evolved to incorporate moving images as video and documentation via the Internet. Streamed from the museum's website, viewers were present in time but not space for the later version.<sup>69</sup> This added another layer to the performance and enhanced the character of voyeurism and surveillance as a global, webcam-mediated audience watched two people stare at each other.

The Internet expanded the context of the artwork from on-site institution to home experience. This evolution is in keeping with the evolution of the infrastructure that museums have developed for publicity. Abramović cannily employs a museum's tool for education and marketing as an artistic medium, creating a hybrid of the museum's infrastructure and the

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<sup>68</sup> "Marina Abramović. *Nightsea Crossing/Conjunction*. 1981-1987/1983." MoMAMultimedia. Accessed August 15, 2013, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1985>.<http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1985>.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

artwork's concept. Exploiting the publicity of the online stream is compatible with the goals of the museum's marketing department. At the same time, it intensifies the artwork's voyeuristic content by using viewers' desire to watch the intimacy of others from afar for its own purposes.

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The complicity of *The Artist is Present* with institutional publicity is another variation of the psychological uneasiness that is a constant in this artist's oeuvre. Abramović does not hesitate to inflict pain on herself or discomfort on her audiences. This is the woman who lost consciousness and almost burned to death when she leapt into the heart of a petroleum-fueled star of fire for her *Rhythm 5* performance in 1974.<sup>70</sup> During *Rhythm 0*, she stood passively for six hours that same year while audience members used an array of 72 chosen objects to inflict pain or pleasure on her body with everything sanctioned by the artist and the gallery where the performance took place. Some participants performed acts of aggression while others protected her.<sup>71</sup> The Internet and on-site format of *The Artist is Present* demonstrates a willingness to be both autonomous artwork and institutional publicity with no critical wink whatsoever and a dubious move to those who become squeamish at the thought of the commercial aspects of art in institutions.

As artists design (and re-design in the case of Abramović) concepts for artwork to use variable media, they truly lift the burden of the paragone. When artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century began acquiring any material at their fingertips and working across media for their artwork, the purpose of the argument of the paragone debate was deeply compromised. Working in variable media goes a step further than one artist's oeuvre using a range of media to the advantage of each independent artwork or even the use of many media in a single "multiple media" work but allows for an artwork's multiple media add and change out over time.

The question is no longer which is the superior medium but how each new medium, variation or iteration of a single artwork alters meaning. This is nowhere more relevant than in art that uses digital media as artistic

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<sup>70</sup> Marina Abramović, Anna Daneri, Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, Lóránd Hegyi, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Angela Vettese, *Marina Abramović* (Milan: Edizioni Charta Srl, 2002), 25.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

media. In this regard it is now relevant to ask how content changes with the specificity of each medium it utilizes, format it complies to and form it assumes. Knowing that time will bring the evolution of technological artistic media and new social contexts, contemporary artists can embrace change as the addition of more layers of meaning. Inevitably, time will also strip away original contexts and a degree of loss will occur. Yet variable media will preserve “The living record of [the artwork’s] memory” that is truly living rather than cast in stone.

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# Clandestine Curses: Hidden Dangers to Charioteers. Roman Spectacles and Entertainment

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by Anya Eber

The circus was one of Rome's most popular and impressive spectacles. The noise of the excited crowd, the sharp competition of the charioteer teams, the dangers of the race track, and the symbolic displays of power greatly appealed to the Romans. The free seats at the race track regularly drew thousands of spectators from all social classes. The circus attracted everyone from the lowest street worker sitting on a wooden bleacher to the emperor himself in his private box. The popularity of this event manifests within the archaeological remains of hundreds of race tracks around the Roman Empire including the Roman Circus Maximus. The Circus Maximus' capacity to hold a third of Rome's population within its seats speaks volumes about the popularity of this event.<sup>1</sup> Evidence of floor mosaics in private Roman homes, such as the Piazza Armerina circus mosaic, display the symbols of wealth and power associated with the circus. Hidden curse tablets further exemplify the popularity of these races. Excavations of lead curse tablets relating to athletic contests, or *Defixiones Agonisticae*, both within the circus arenas and outside of them, have supplied us with a more complete understanding of the circus' importance. Spectators and

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**Editor's note:** Due to copyright restrictions illustrations were unable to digital reproduce. A full caption is being given though for further reference.

<sup>1</sup> Roland Auguet. "Chariot Races, Stables and Factions." *Cruelty and Civilization: the Roman Games*. (London: Routledge, 1994). 124-125.

charioteers buried these curses in an effort to affect the outcome of the race. Inscriptions and drawings on the tablets' surfaces requested the death and failure of certain charioteers or factions within the races. *Defixiones Agonisticae* express Roman investment in the circus contest and the political and social significance of the competitions' outcome. The circus was a spectacle of violence, danger, and victory that the Roman elite used to demonstrate their power and importance.

To understand *Defixiones Agonisticae* we must first understand the circus and its players. The "Circus Mosaic" at Piazza Armerina, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, provides a detailed picture of a typical circus (Figure 1).<sup>†</sup> From the mosaic one can easily make out the oval race track with the long *spina* at its center. Up to twelve four-horse chariot teams would have raced around this *spina* in a counter clockwise direction. The *spina* was typically filled with war trophies and exotic objects to showcase the might of Rome. In the *spina* depicted, we can make out an obelisk as well as a number of other statues that display Roman power over foreign lands. Discreetly to the left of the obelisk is a lap counter with what appears to be seven eggs. At the end of each lap an egg would have fallen-this method allowed spectators to know which lap the leading horse was running. On each end of the *spina* are *metae* or turning posts. These *metae* and the starting gates of the track (represented on the far right of the mosaic) were the points of greatest danger. Teams often crashed at these crucial sections in the track. At the *metae* on the left side of the mosaic we can see one of these typical crashes, known as *naufragium* or shipwrecks to the Romans. These crashes were often fatal to the charioteer or his horses.

Charioteers tied the reins of their horses to their bodies as depicted in the mosaic. This helped them control the team, but, in a crash, it often led to being dragged and trampled. A charioteer always carried a knife in case of this scenario, but just because he escaped death by his own horses did not mean he escaped being run over by another charioteer.<sup>2</sup> The danger and

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<sup>†</sup> *Drawing of the Circus Mosaic at Piazza Armerina*, villa in Sicily. Early fourth century CE. Lecture by Dr. Molholt, Brown University.

<sup>2</sup> N. Crowther, "Roman Chariot Racing." *Sport in Ancient Times*. (Praeger, 2007) 129.

violence of the circus increased spectator appeal. Victory was all the sweeter when death could be the cost. Romans loved this element of danger and exploited it in the Roman curse tablets discussed in the next section.

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The beginning of the race was one of the most dangerous sections of the race and also one of the most symbolic moments of the race. To announce the beginning of the circus, the benefactor of the race, usually a wealthy consul or magistrate, would hold up the *mappa*, a white piece of cloth. All eyes would be on him as he dropped this piece of white cloth to symbolize the beginning of the race. Because of this symbolic opening, the *mappa* became an icon of power and wealth. In that moment, the sponsor of the event made it clear to the thousands of spectators that he was wealthy enough to sponsor the race, that he was important enough to command their attention, and that he was a member of the Roman elite. Political candidates often hosted the games in order to gain popularity and to win support from the masses. Even the wealthy owner of Piazza Armerina depicted the important presence of the crowd in his circus mosaic. They played a key role in the circus spectacle.

The passion of the crowd has been well documented. Romans were avid supporters of the four different factions: the Blue, Green, Red, and White teams. Spectators often knew the charioteers and their horses by name and displayed frescoes and mosaics of them within their homes. Pliny the Younger complains about this fanatical partisanship and the displays of power associated with the circus when he writes,

I am the more astonished that so many thousands of grown men should be possessed again and again with a childish passion to look at galloping horses, and men standing upright in their chariots. If, indeed, they were attracted by the swiftness of the horses or the skill of the men, one could account for this enthusiasm. But in fact it is a bit of cloth they favour, a bit of cloth that captivates them. And if during the running the racers were to exchange colours, their partisans would change sides, and instantly forsake

the very drivers and horses whom they were just before recognizing from afar, and clamorously saluting by name.<sup>3</sup>

The very aspects of the race which Pliny chastises are those which caused Roman spectators and charioteers to commission curse tablets. The fanatical partisanship of faction supporters, the gambling, and political images bound up with the outcome of the race all led to the burying of *Defixiones Agonisticae* (lead curse tablets).

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*Defixiones* or binding spells were written on curse tablets in order to carry out a plethora of missions. As Graf states, "The usual objective of ritual binding is, thus, to subject another human being to one's will, to make the person unable to act according to his or her own wishes."<sup>4</sup> To date, over one thousand five hundred curse tablets have been excavated.<sup>5</sup> However, not all of these are *Defixiones Agonisticae*, curses related to athletic contests. Graf splits the *Defixiones* into five categories: *Defixiones iudicariae* (judicial spells), *Defixiones amatoriae* (erotic spells), *Defixiones agonisticae* (athletic contest spells), *Defixiones* against slanderers or thieves, and *Defixiones* against economic competitors (commerce based spells).<sup>6</sup> The third group, *Defixiones agonisticae*, was commissioned by charioteers and their fans in order to affect the outcome of the circus. Charioteers placed tablets to curse their opponents. Gamblers used them to secure bets they had placed. Political figures employed them to ensure the victorious image that they desired. Farone explains the motives behind curse tablets when he states, "The intended victims...are not being cursed because they are guilty of any crime or misdeed against the defigens but rather because they are his rivals with regard to social prestige or economic position, and any attack against their social position will result in an increase of his own honor."<sup>7</sup> Spectators

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<sup>3</sup> Pliny the Younger letter 9.6 translated by William Melmoth, H. A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972], 220-21)

<sup>4</sup> Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 120.

<sup>5</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 120-121.

<sup>7</sup> H.S. Versnel, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

and charioteers alike craved success and were willing to destroy anyone obstructing their way to victory.

Unfortunately, due to the fact that the commissioners of the tablets never wrote their names on the spells, we will never truly know who placed these tablets or their personal motives. The most obvious reason for this lack of names is that curse tablets were illegal in the Roman world. As Heinz states, “practicing magic was...a capital offense under Roman law: convicted magicians, as well as their accomplices and customers, faced death by fire or exposure to wild beasts.”<sup>8</sup> The legal ramifications of being found responsible for a curse tablet probably stopped the majority of commissioners from associating themselves with the tablets. Those not afraid of the law appeared afraid of the spell transferring to themselves, or of counter magic from someone who might have found the tablet.

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The authors of these tablets may be unknown, but the process that they used to make them and bury them is not. Curse spells were written on lead tablets. Lead was probably the medium of choice for a number of reasons. Farone explains two of the common theories as to why lead was employed, first that “lead was probably used because it was a cheap writing medium in classical Attica and elsewhere (it is a byproduct of silver mining).” Second, he explains that “the peculiar coldness and color of the metal (like the pallor of a corpse) might have made its use for *Defixiones* especially appealing.”<sup>9</sup> Once the spell had been written on the lead tablet, it was then folded up and run through with a nail. The meaning behind the process of piercing the tablet with a nail probably “derives from the ordinary function of nails, which is to fasten, to fix, to tie down, and thus to bind.”<sup>10</sup> A symbolic element of adding “pain and death to the spell”<sup>11</sup> has also been suggested. This process symbolizes the theme of danger and violence which permeated

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<sup>8</sup> Florent Heintz, “Magic Tablets and the Games at Antioch,” in *Antioch: the Lost Ancient City* (2000): 52.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher A. Farone. *Magika Hiera Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 7.

<sup>10</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>11</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 18.

the circus. The race track abounded with fatal dangers for a charioteer; it was the curse tablet's job to make the charioteer susceptible to them. For tablets such as the "Circus Tablet from Carthage" (see figure 2)<sup>†</sup> the procedure appears to have been practical. This curse tablet was affixed to the circus at Carthage's floor by a bronze nail. It is difficult to say whether the practice began as symbolic or practical, but it is clear that piercing tablets with nails became a ritual component of curse tablets.

Once the tablet had been created and nailed closed, it was then buried somewhere auspicious. Many *Defixiones Agonisticae* such as the "Circus tablet from Carthage" were buried or nailed to the circus itself. Alternatively, they were placed at particularly dangerous sections of the track, such as the starting gates or *metae*. The Papyri Graecae Magicae give a number of other locations that one might choose, such as having "(the tablet) buried or [put in] a river or land or sea or stream or coffin or in a well."<sup>12</sup> Water was often a good choice as that was an element associated with death, the underworld, and its deities. Graves were also considered good sites. According to Gager, the "burial sites of those who had died young or by violent means were the preferred choices, because it was believed that their souls remained in a restless condition near the graves until their normal life span had been reached."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it seems that some spirits were so helpful that Romans assigned them curse after curse to fulfill.

The "Roman Circus Tablet" (figure 3)<sup>†</sup> was found in a group deposit of such a spirit. The tablet was found in a tomb along the Via Appia with approximately fifty-six other lead curse tablets, all of which were rolled up and pierced with nails according to custom. What is unusual about this deposit is that they were all also placed in miniature terra cotta sarcophagi. From the uniform burial method and their date to the fourth century C.E., it

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<sup>†</sup> Figure 2: Defixio from the race track at Carthage. Photograph by Bill Wood From Gager, *Curse tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, pg 19

<sup>12</sup> Line 451-52 Papyri Graecae magicae, vol 1, ed.k. Preisendanz (stuttgart, 1928);rev.ed., A. Henrichs (1973); vol 2, ed. K. Preisendanz (1931)

<sup>13</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>†</sup> Figure 3: "Roman Curse Tablet" from Rome. *Wünsch's drawing from Ogden, Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, pg 213.

appears that these curses were all deposited by the same curse tablet creator.

The “Roman Circus Tablet” itself is extremely elaborate and contains a wealth of details about charioteer curses. In the center of the tablet, there is a horse headed demon figure carrying a chariot wheel in his left hand and a charioteer whip in his right hand. The tablet is inscribed with clear instructions for this demon and the other spirits that it invokes to curse the charioteer Cardelus, saying “I invoke you... so that you may help me and restrain and hold in check Cardelus and bring him to a bed of punishment, to be punished with an evil death, to come to an evil condition, him who his mother Fulgentina bore.”<sup>14</sup>

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“The Roman Circus Tablet” is a perfect example of how curse tablets attempted to create a sense of confusion and uncertainty through images and words. The reference to the charioteer’s mother was commonly used on curse tablets. Curse tablets often identified the victim by “maternal lineage, a social inversion (from the usual patronymic) to match such tablets’ many linguistic inversions.”<sup>15</sup> Other methods such as the *vocus magicae*, or strings of demonic names, used in this tablet add to the element of chaos. Even the way that it was written promotes the purpose of tangling up and causing confusion. As Gager eloquently puts it, “every other line on the tablet is written upside down and backward manifest[ing] a deliberate attempt, through symbolic action, to ‘twist and turn’ the intended target.”<sup>16</sup> These different approaches were thought to cause chaos and instability and transfer negative energies to the target of the curse.

“The Roman Circus Tablet” also displays the spell’s attempt to restrain and hold Charioteers such as Cardelus in check. In the upper left of the tablet is a tomb with the bust of the charioteer above it. There appear to be nails in both the bust and the tomb. Perhaps the curse was trying to bind the image

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<sup>14</sup> Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a Sourcebook*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 212.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: a Sourcebook*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 214.

<sup>16</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67.



of the charioteer with his imminent death. The bound figure in a coffin at the bottom of the tablet certainly seems to convey this message. This bound figure, presumably Cardelus, was purposefully run through with the nail that pierced the tablet itself; symbolically conveying an image of torture and distress. Not only is this figure pierced with a nail, but it is encircled with two snakes about to strike its head. All of this imagery conveys the tablet's goal to make the victim powerless and unable to compete in the circus race.

One sees similar imagery being employed in a third century C.E. tablet discovered near the ancient race course in Beirut Syria (figure 4).<sup>†</sup> On this tablet, one sees a bound figure being attacked by the head of a snake. Carefully marked on the body of the figure are circles to indicate where nails should be placed in the binding process. These images along with requests of a number of holy angels to "attack, bind, overturn, cut up, chop into pieces the horses and the charioteers of the Blue colors- Numphikos, Thalophoros, [long list of names]"<sup>17</sup> are similar to the "Roman Circus Tablet." Nails are used to link the charioteer with the death and violence of the circus arena and the spell reinforces the message with names to guide evil forces.

However, not all of the tablets chose to use such detailed pictures. Another tablet buried between the first and third century C.E. in the grave of a Roman official in Carthage has much sparser decor (See figure 5).<sup>†</sup> Beyond the writing of the curse, the only decorations on this tablet are the Charaktêres, symbols of great power written in its margins. As Gager explains them, "they embody the classic definition of a religious symbol as embodying and transmitting power from the divine realm to the human."<sup>18</sup> It is unclear what they actually meant or if the Romans even ascribed a specific meaning to each symbol. It is quite possible that the power of Charaktêres

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<sup>†</sup> Figure 4: "Defixio" from Beirut Syria. Gager, *Curse tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, pg 54..

<sup>17</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55.

<sup>†</sup> Figure 5: "Defixio" from Carthage. Gager, *Curse tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, pg 66.

<sup>18</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11.

lay in their unknown mysterious symbolism. Despite the power attributed to these symbols, the commissioner of this curse appears to have been afraid to lose the clarity of his curse.

Perhaps, due to the lack of images on the tablet, its author made its written message even more detailed than the others. The spell invokes a number of *vocus magicae* to, bind every limb and sinew of Victoricus- the Charioteer of the Blue team...and of his horses which he is about to race... Bind their legs, their onrush, their bounding, and their running; blind their eyes so that they cannot see and twist their soul and heart so that they cannot breath. Just as this rooster has been bound by its feet, hands, and head, so bind the legs and hands and head and heart of Victoricus the charioteer of the Blue team... so that they may not reach victory tomorrow in the circus. Now, now, quickly, quickly.<sup>19</sup>

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This written set of instructions gives a good idea of what the bound figure imagery was trying to portray. Similar to the concept of *Damnatio memoriae* in portraiture, these curses are trying to cut off the sight, mouth/breath, and mobility of the charioteers through words and images.<sup>20</sup>

A fifth or sixth century curse found in a fill on the Orontes River near Apamea uses all of these methods of binding as well as suggesting practical ways of removing opposing charioteer's strength, such as depriving them of food and sleep (Figure 6).<sup>†</sup> The curse tablet itself has thirty-six Charaktêres and is addressed to the symbols themselves instead of the usual demons and gods. The tablet reads,

Most holy Charaktêres, tie up, bind the feet, the hands, the sinews, the eyes, the knees, the courage, the whip, the victory and the crowning of Pophuras and Hapisicrates, who are in the middle left, as well as his co drivers of the

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<sup>19</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64-67.

<sup>20</sup> E. Varner, *From Caligula to Constantine: Tyranny and Transformation in Roman Portraiture* (2000): 14-15.

<sup>†</sup> Figure 6: "Defixio" from Apamea in Syria. Gager, Graf, *Curse tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, pg 56.

Blue colors in the stable of Eugenius. From this very hour, from today, may they not eat or drink or sleep; instead from the starting gates may they see daimones of those who have died prematurely, spirits of those who have died violently...in the hippodrome at the moment when they are about to compete may they not squeeze over, may they not collide, may they not extend, may they not force us out, may they not overtake, may they not break off (in a new direction) for the entire day when they are about to race. May they be broken, may they be dragged (on the ground), may they be destroyed; by Topos and by Zablas. Now, now, quickly, quickly.<sup>21</sup>

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This curse provides us with a better understanding of the strategies used in the circus from the requests that this curse makes to stop the tactics of the Blue team. The curse specifically asks that the Blue team “not collide...not force us out.” These tactics give us an idea of how charioteers might gain an advantage in the arena and the spectacle they created when employing such strategies. This spell also showcases the use of *daimones* and of the restless dead to spook horses and charioteers. Moreover, it includes the typical ending phrase of “Now, Now, quickly, quickly.”

These curse tablets reflect the passionate involvement of the circus spectators and charioteers in the races. The wide variety of curses and victims shows that burying *Defixiones Agonisticae* was a regular occurrence associated with the circus. The time and effort put into these tablets, and the legal repercussions of commissioning such a tablet, shows us the lengths that Romans went to for the chance at victory in the circus. The motive of the tablets is clear: to hold back and hinder one’s opponents. For charioteers and plebian gamblers this translates to simply holding an opposing charioteer back from victory. For the elite, these tablets and their effect on the races was about much more than hindering one charioteer’s success. Procopius, a sixth century historian, writes that “On a ‘visit’ to Apamea, the Persian general Chosroes issued orders for a special series of races in the hippodrome of the city. Knowing that the Roman emperor

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<sup>21</sup> John. G Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57-58.

Justinian favored the Blues, Chosroes decided to support the Greens. When the Blues took an early lead, Chosroes commanded his agents to slow down the Blue team in order to guarantee a Green victory.”<sup>22</sup> Thus for the elite, these races were about the political factions behind the charioteers. The circus was a great spectacle of social image. From the drop of the *mappa* to the crowning of the winning team, these races were used to portray power and victory. Everyone wished to be associated with such a public triumph. Whether they were plebeians clamoring for the horse that they had bet on or Roman consuls attempting to create a political image for themselves, all of them were intimately invested in the races.

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The circus was a spectacle with political connotations that not even the emperor could control. The *Defixiones Agonisticae* represent an attempt to control the uncontrollable. Their complicated creation process, their secretive burial, and the deadly words inscribed on their surfaces show the investment of the Roman population in the circus. Everyone in the crowd craved victory; and, as the curse tablets so accurately state, the desire was, to obtain victory, “Now, Now, quickly, quickly.”

**Anya Eber**, Brown University, had been the recipient of Brown Joukowsky Undergraduate paper prize (Brown University, 2010) for this essay.

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<sup>22</sup> Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 56.



## Books received

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**Howard D. Weinbrot** (2013) *Literature, Religion, and the Evolution of Culture, 1660-1780*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.



## Call for manuscripts

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[Advertising images / Art as advertisement](#)

**Art History Supplement, vol. 3, no. 6, November 2013**

**Manuscripts due to October 15, 2013**

Images with advertising attitude frequently draw forms and figures from artworks. This appropriation is commonly discussed in each case as a reference to the particular work of art being discussed in the image of the advertisement, when it comes to an art history curriculum. The reception of that artwork would be the primary concern of that study. For instance, see John Berger (1972) *Ways of Seeing*, London: BBC and Penguin Books, chapter seven. The role of advertisement is primarily to communicate a certain message in order to support, in one way or another, the promotion, the sale or the awareness of a particular product. This product may be a commodity; including a person or an idea, for instance. Such a perspective inevitably brings art historians in front of a certain quandary.

When are advertising images becoming part of a history of art (art history) curriculum on their own status? Could advertising images bridge the gap, if such a gap exists indeed, between history of art and history of images?

On the other hand, according to *OED* (2nd edition), for instance, an *advertisement* could be defined as: a) the turning of the mind to anything, b) the action of calling the attention of others; admonition, warning, precept, instruction, c) the action of informing or notifying; information, notification, notice, d) a (written) statement calling attention to anything; a notification,



a 'notice', e) a public notice or announcement: formerly by the town-crier; now, usually, in writing or print, by placards, or in a journal; spec. a paid announcement in a newspaper or other print.

Yet, Hoepli describes the current meanings of *pubblicità* as a) L'essere fatto in pubblico, b) azione del far conoscere al pubblico, c) complesso delle varie forme di propaganda aventi lo scopo di far conoscere e di incrementare il consumo e l'uso di un prodotto commerciale, di un servizio, d) mezzo con cui si fa conoscere al pubblico, a scopo commerciale, un determinato prodotto, e) piccola pubblicità, nei giornali, la rubrica degli annunci economici.

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While, John Florio (1611) in his Italian – English dictionary annotated the meaning of *publicatione* as *a publication, a proclamation, a manifestation, a making known* (p. 408).

Wouldn't all these above qualities be able to describe images regarded, for example, as renaissance and/ or early modern art? A) Religious or humanistic art communicating a political or cultural message, B) "preaching" through images, C) the narration or the narrative element of early modern painting, D) the dictum that images can be the Book of the illiterates, E) public devotional or secular commemorative art or the diffusion of engravings. The drawing of such intriguing parallels could be alleged to the role and the use of those art images in those times, based on the theoretical and their rhetorical structures, as patronage and reception studies, built upon the Panofskian model of "cultural" signs.

Papers and short notes are sought to support, or not, the advertising images as a traceable chapter in a history of art survey course; concerning the use of these images, along with any stylistic dimensions these images have. Moreover, submissions are being welcomed to investigate earlier examples of *advertisements* through renaissance and early modern religious, or not, paintings, portraits, engravings and ephemera.

For more information on author's guidelines, visit

<http://www.arths.org.uk/about/journal/author-s-guidelines>.

**Note:** Contributions to previous *Art History Supplement* CFPs are accepted anytime, since all our call for papers are mere thought provoking; as an ongoing research on the study of public and oral art history, and in art histories that have shaped art history, as well. Past CFPs can be found under <http://arths.hypotheses.org/category/cfp>.

More, artists are invited to submit artworks to be featured as cover page art. Send artistic contributions (jpeg or tiff, min. 300 dpi) to [editor@arths.org.uk](mailto:editor@arths.org.uk).

In addition, Art Histories Society is looking for people, ideas and perspectives to actively contribute in its research and user generated content projects. Further, the calling for guest editors at Art History Supplement can be found at <http://arths.hypotheses.org/269>.

## From Sacred to Secular

### **Art History Supplement, January 2015**

**Deadline for submission of 150-word abstracts: December 1, 2013**

**Deadline for submission of final papers: July 1, 2014**

**Contact: Katherine T. Brown, Guest Editor, [ktbrown@walsh.edu](mailto:ktbrown@walsh.edu)**

*Art History Supplement* seeks papers about works of art from any time period or culture that embody a dichotomy of the sacred and secular, especially works whose meanings or functions changed from devotional to civic, or vice versa, soon after creation or over an extended period of time. As an example, the image of the Madonna della Misericordia, or Mary of Mercy, has origins in Marian devotion but was adopted by lay confraternities as civic emblems of charity in 14<sup>th</sup>-century Italy. In a more well-known example, Michelangelo originally sculpted the *David* in a religious context for placement on the Florentine Duomo. Yet after its completion in 1504, the work became a civic symbol for the Florentine

Republic in its placement outside the Palazzo della Signoria. Likewise, Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* of 1460 depicts an Apocryphal theme that also served as a political metaphor for Medici rule in Florence.

Papers must contain a minimum of 3,000 words. Authors are responsible for securing high-quality digital images and securing rights to reproduce them electronically. Additional author guidelines can be found here:

<http://www.arths.org.uk/about/journal/author-s-guidelines>

## Call for guest editors

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*Art History Supplement* is actively looking for guest editors. There are opportunities for January, March, May, July, September, November issue of each year; starting from November 2013. The months indicate the date of publication. Guest editors will, thus, need the necessary time and will be responsible for the appropriate communication of call for papers, the editing – final selection of the papers and writing an editorial.

All papers accepted should comply with the AHS author's guidelines. Email your interest, a proposal — including a theme and a time frame — along with a short CV to the ArTHS Editor.

Art History Supplement (Online edition: ISSN 2046-9225) is a bimonthly peer-reviewed, international and interdisciplinary e-journal; publishing material dealing with all time periods and methodologies within the field of art history. Art History Supplement is a free, full text online, e-journal since 2011. In addition, there are thoughts for the printing of a special hardcopy volume for the celebration of its three years online, 2011–2013.

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